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AGENTLESS CONSTRUCTIONS AND INFORMATION DISTRIBUTION IN A SENTENCE

Alina Jackiewicz

1. INTRODUCTION

Conceptualising messages in material processes, i.e. processes which express doing and causing (CRUSE, 2000; DIXON, 1991; DOWNING, LOCKE, 1995) presupposes the occurrence of certain participant roles such as:

AGENT:	<i>The spectators cheered.</i>
AFFECTED:	<i>An avalanche buried the climbers.</i>
EFFECTED:	<i>Mary made an omelette.</i>
RECIPIENT:	<i>They gave the children some sweets.</i>
BENEFICIARY:	<i>I'll pour you some coffee.</i>

The first of them, i.e. Agent, prototypically realized by a noun phrase denoting an animate entity seems crucial in defining the essence of congruent realizations of the processes in question. What actually is of interest of the author of the presentation are the situations where discourse is systematically deprived of agents. What this research focuses on is the constructions where the presence of the agent is precluded.

The aim of this paper and the undertaken research is to juxtapose agentlessness with the phenomenon of information distribution in a simple sentence. The main objective is to observe the theme-rheme allocation in the situa-

tion when the presence of the agent is precluded and the whole message contains information that is new, as if all in focus. Additionally, it is my intention to monitor word order shiftiness making an allowance for the typological universals theory (GIVON, 1987; DOWNING and NOONAN, 1995).

Before I concentrate on the research proper, I find it necessary to present the framework for this study, which boils down to introducing the proposed understanding of the terms involved in the survey. Let me in the next section ponder over agentlessness and then devote some time to theme/rheme opposition with some light thrown on the concept of focus with special insight into word order principles.

2. AGENTS AND AGENTLESS CONSTRUCTIONS

The school of thought initiated by FILLMORE (1968), which has been lavishly exploited by next generations of linguists (CRUSE, 2000; DIXON, 1991; DOWNING and LOCKE, 1995) defines agent as “any entity that is capable of operating on itself or others, usually to bring about some change in the location or properties of itself or others” (DOWNING and LOCKE, 1995: 114). Prototypical agents are human and are characterized by such properties as animacy, intention, motivation, responsibility and the use of one’s own energy to cause the event or trigger the process. Sentences (1—3) exemplify the issue:

- (1) *The Chairman resigned.*
- (2) *The spectators gave a standing ovation.*
- (3) *Tom kicked the ball.*

However, there exist instances of agents which lack one or more of these features (4):

- (4) *The horse splashed us with mud as it passed.*

Sentence (4) contains an agent (horse) that definitely did not perform the act deliberately, therefore the properties categorized as: intention, motivation and..., I am hesitant about responsibility, will not be shared by it.

There are agents which do not share the primary feature, i.e. animacy, and here the term Force or Inanimate Agent is applied (5—7):

- (5) *Lightning struck the apple tree.*
- (6) *Stress can ruin your health.*
- (7) *An avalanche buried the tourists.*

Additionally, linguists (CRUSE, 2000; DIXON, 1991; DOWNING and LOCKE, 1995) distinguish Causative Agents of different types (8—10) but basically what they are deficient in is the use of one's own energy while causing the Affected (also Patient or Goal) (here: egg, lamp, kite) participant to undergo or perform the action.

(8) *Susie cooked some potatoes.*

(9) *A stone broke the lamp.*

(10) *The girl flew the kite.*

Still, another type of an agent can be encountered when grammatical metaphor is involved (11):

(11) *November 19 found the linguists in Porto Alegre.*

Having submitted a brief outline of the concept of agentivity, I would like to proceed to the occurrences in the language which are systematically devoid of it.

3. OVERVIEW OF THE AGENTLESS CONSTRUCTIONS

The structures under discussion have been labeled in a variety of different ways throughout the history of linguistics (POLAŃSKI, 1993; KARDELA, 1996). Let me illustrate the phenomenon with uncontroversial, in my opinion instances of it. English:

(E.1) passive voice:

The construction has been successfully completed.

(E.2) impersonal one:

One accepts Euro here.

(E.3) middles:

This shirt washes well.

(E.4) impersonal you

You would think they are more reasonable.

Polish:

(P.1) passive voice:

Budowa została szczęśliwie ukończona.

(P.2) impersonal *się* construction:

Się pracuje to się ma.

(P.3) middles:

Toyota Corolla dobrze sprzedaje się na naszym rynku.

(P.4) secondary impersonality:

Pójdiesz tam i dostaniesz po głowie.

(P.5) a 3rd person sg. neuter verb:

Wybiło szybę.

(P.6) -no, -to constructions:

Zadano mi kilka prostych pytań.

(P.7) uninflected modals:

Trzeba rozumieć problemy innych.

(P.8.) sensation verbs:

Mdli mnie.

Each of sentences from the above list distinguishes a separate aspect of the phenomenon that is the subject matter of this article. Sentences (E.1, P.1) in both the English and Polish data are examples of passive voice, which is a linguistic device whose primary function is avoiding reference to the agent, which is either unknown or undesirable.

Sentence (E.2) in the English list illustrates the impersonal construction with *one*. Since there are several uses of the word *one* in English, I shall have to specify that the *one* in question is referred to as the “indefinite one” (in QUIRK et al., 1991). The same authors claim that *one* means “people in general” with reference to the speaker. In SCHIBSBY’S (1965: 276) opinion “*one* can be an indefinite personal pronoun signifying I and others”. This use of *one* is chiefly formal and is often replaced by the more informal *you*, which will be introduced afterwards. The Polish construction presented with label (P.2) consists of a verb — 3rd person sg. with the element *się* which makes it impossible for a “regular” subject to come forth. These syntactic structures are translational equivalents of the German sentences with *man* and the English ones with *one*. *Rozmawia się tu po angielsku. ‘One speaks English here’*. That is why they are grouped together.

Two sentences labelled as (E.3, P.3) are instances of middle constructions. Some linguists classify them as notional passives, i.e. as sentences which have passive meaning but whose form lacks the assisting formal marker. The term “middles” is associated with the middle voice, the term that goes back to the Greek distinction between three voices ‘active’, ‘passive’ and ‘middle’. LYONS (1971), STEFAŃSKI (1990) and QUIRK et. al. (1991), quoting ancient Grammarians state that the middle was thought of as intermediate between the primary opposition of active and passive. It signified either an “action”, like the active, or

a “state”, like the passive, according to the inherent meaning of the verb in question and the circumstances of use.

The English example (E.4) demonstrates the occurrence of the impersonal construction with *you*, being the less formal counterpart of *one*. The origin of this use could be traced back by the analogy to the Polish language. Structure (P.4), which in fact is the translational equivalent of the English structure (E.4) definitely belongs to colloquial Polish and it resembles a standard utterance directed to the hearer — 2nd person sg. with a dropped pronoun *ty* ‘you’ sg. This one certainly does not have a trace of agentlessness. The second reading of this sentence is what interests us. That is why this sentence is secondarily impersonal. *Pójdiesz* ‘you will go’ — 2nd person sg. refers to an indefinite in number group of people including the speaker and the hearer.

Sentence (P.5) illustrates a third person singular neuter verb which marks the message that implies an inanimate cause of the action. We can put it in contrast with *Wybito szybę*, which clearly denotes the human involvement. We know it was a person who did it as opposed to sentence (P.5), where it could have been the wind, for instance.

Suffixes *-no*, *-to* identify sentences such as (P.6). The scope of those endings is very widespread. There are very few verbs that are constrained to their application. A verb with such a suffix can never co-occur with a subject and it refers either to a group of people or to one individual different from the speaker and the addressee involved in a past action.

Sentence (P.7) reveals the occurrence of a group of modal uninflected forms of verbs whose univocal classification is probably impossible. The ending of those modal predicates is fossilized and fitting in a potential subject is unacceptable. Those elements are followed by infinitives.

Polish sentence (P.8), referring to the sensations of the body represent a unique (from the structural point of view) class of constructions. In sentence (P.8) *mdli* is a 3rd person sg. neuter verb and it is followed by *mnie* which is a personal pronoun of the 1st person sg. Acc. The status of *mnie* is still a contentious matter for some linguists. From the point of view of formality, it meets all the demands of a direct object. A question arises what this thing or phenomenon is that causes the activity denoted by *mdli*. Is there a subject in this structure different than the person who experiences *mdłości* ‘sickness’, given the fact that it is expressed in Accusative case?

The presentation makes it clear that the array of possible agentless constructions is much wider in Polish than in English.

Let me now proceed to the second essential concept exploited in this article, which due to space limitations imposed by the editor will only be touched upon.

4. THEME AND RHEME WITH REFERENCE TO FOCUS

Theme is the point of departure of the message (DOWNING and LOCKE, 1995). It is realised in English by the first clause constituent and the rest of the message constitutes the rheme, as the following examples show:

Theme	Rheme
I	can't stand the noise.
The noise	I can't stand.
It's the noise	I can't stand.
What I can't stand	is the noise.
The noise	I can't stand

The concept of theme was first discussed by Vilem Mathesius (1928), one of the founders of the Prague Linguistic Circle (COWAN, 1995). The Principle of Old Things first, which he formulated can be summarized as follows: each sentence added to discourse should be structured so that (old/given) thematic material precedes rhematic material.

5. RESEARCH PROJECT

5.1. AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of the undertaken research was to examine the mental representation of agentlessness in natural languages. Thinking in terms of UG (CHOMSKY, 1965) and supporting herself with the findings of typological linguistics (GREENBERG, 1966; GIVON, 1987; DOWNING and NOONAN, 1995) the author risked a thesis that communicative situations devoid of the explicit exponents of the involvement of active participants will affect the word order of the utterance. Bearing in mind that human languages possess numerous grammatical devices (affluently discussed above) of expressing agentlessness and that the word order is conditioned by the distribution of information in terms it being old or new the observation (called thesis here) might not sound particularly illuminating. But, the conjecture that instigated the study was, which actually is the major research question here is what is the word order of the utterance describing the action without any marked occurrence of an agent and which, as was shrewdly designed by the author contains exclusively new information. The last element seemed to be most challenging. Some researchers (DOWNING and LOCKE, 1995;

TOMLIN, 1995) believe that it is unnatural to analyze word order neglecting the context. The author being aware of that continues her reasoning bringing closer the idea that human communication abounds in the interrogative utterances such as *Co się stało?* ‘*What has happened?*’ which are an evident instance where the contribution of the verbal context is absolutely scanty let alone none. The most ultimate objective was to provide such an elicitation technique as to provoke utterances that would conform to the requirements of the present study.

5.2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

The typological methodology of studying constraints on word order (DOWNING, NOONAN, 1995) encompasses three major approaches: the sentence elicitation approach, the text distribution approach and the experimental approach. The first method (sentence elicitation), which actually has been made use of most often, consists in interviewing native speakers of a language under discussion and eliciting from them grammaticality judgements. The major drawback of this method is that the subjects frequently point to two alternative word order patterns considering them grammatical. The text distribution approach focuses on investigating word orders in actual texts which constitute a corpus for the researcher. It is a discourse — based approach. The third approach, referred to as experimental may involve many diversified facets which are employed by the researcher to manipulate discourse factors.

For the purposes of this study the author decided to employ the last method since only this approach allows the speaker being the subject in the study to produce his/her own utterances. Let me remind you that in the first method grammaticality judgements are made and the second does not go beyond the scope of the corpus.

The experiment was preceded by a pilot study, whose aim was to select an appropriate set of pictures that would manipulate the respondents proper in the proper study to producing utterances that recognise the factor which has been the point of departure in the survey (i.e. agentlessness). The procedure in the pilot study was considerably less formal than required in the experiment. Subjects, i.e. students were shown several pictures and they were requested to respond to the question *Co się stało?* ‘*What has happened?*’ Some of them were to respond in Polish, some in both Polish and English and some only in English. The author hoped that the factor of involving two language systems might be an interesting variable but since the pilot study did not reveal any tendencies, it was not exploited any further. The ultimate result of the pilot study was a set of three pictures that seemed to have scored highest on the scale of agentlessness recognition. Picture number one presents a man on the side of the road trying to change the wheel. The second picture is a photo taken at the butcher’s shop in

the 80s of the last century in Poland, when such a phenomenon that apart from the queue and the shop-assistant there is absolutely nothing, was not particularly unusual. Picture number three shows tanks in the streets of Warsaw; the wintry surroundings facilitate the recognition of commonly known fact in the modern history of Poland, i.e. 13th Dec 1981 the introduction of martial law.

The experiment took place between 2nd—19th October 2007. The subjects in the study were first, second and third year students of the English Department of the University of Silesia. The total number of respondents is 62. The gender and age factors were not considered relevant in this survey and therefore these variables will not appear in the discussion. Each respondent was interviewed individually. Three pictures were successively demonstrated to each subject with an instruction to respond orally to the question *Co się stało?* with reference two pictures and ‘*What has happened?*’ to the remaining one. Evidently, the pictures circulated in such a way that in the end each of them obtained approximately the same number of English responses. The choice of the *modus operandi* was dictated by the author’s conviction that English data collected through interviews with non — native users of English, however proficient they may be should not be juxtaposed by the same token with the Polish data legitimately acquired from its native users. Therefore, more attention was paid to collecting Polish material, since it will be exploited while attempting to formulate ultimate inferences, whereas English data will only serve as a point of departure for further investigation and will only be used to articulate tentative conclusions.

5.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION CONCLUDING REMARKS

The results of the research were very diversified and the initial hypothesis concerning agentlessness, information distribution and word order was to be substantially reworded. Let me proceed to the particular sections of the research question, which as the reader remembers were dictated by the three pictures that were used as the stimulating question. Picture no. 1 showing the broken car by the side of the road obtained the following results; the vast majority of respondents (i.e. 69%) used the construction labelled here as 3rd person sg. neuter verb, which by definition implies inanimate cause of the action, which fact adequately corresponds to the situation described. The word order issue, on the other hand shows that two-thirds of the answers conform to the universal word order principle, i.e. SVO (*Samochód/maluch się zepsuł*) and one third, where the verb occupies the initial position (*Zepsuło się auto/samochód*). There was a number of marginal answers involving passive voice (*W samochodzie została przebita opona*) and the unexpected structure with an agent in the subject position (*Mężczyzna złapał gumę w maluchu*).

The English data, which as was mentioned before, will be used only to make preliminary inferences confirmed the well-being of the universally conceived neutral word-order, i.e. SVO with the 100% of occurrences. When it comes to the choice of the agentless constructions, passive voice dominated. There were 62% responses of the type '*The car has broken down*'. The remaining ones encompass '*A tyre is flat*' or '*The man caught a flat tyre*'.

The results obtained from the second picture, i.e. the one taken at the butcher's shop show that here again the 3rd person sg. neuter verb construction scores highest. Less than half (46%) of the subjects opted for *Zabrakło towaru/jedzenia w sklepie*. Around one quarter (23%) used a passive construction *Wszystko zostało wysprzedane w sklepie* or *Towar nie został dowieziony*, which is quite unexpected. Impersonal *-no, -to* construction was employed by 15% of subjects, who produced utterances such as *Nie przywieziono towaru* or *Wyprzedano wszystkie produkty*. The sample referring to this situation shows that there is a strong tendency to place the verb sentence initially. There was one response which showed an absolute ignorance of the cultural reference (*Szatniarka zgubiła pani płaszcz*. '*The cloak-room attendant has lost the lady's coat*'). The English material does not seem to contribute much to the discussed issue because the utterances produced represent regular active voice ('*Goods haven't arrived*' or '*Goods have run out*').

The third picture, i.e. the one showing the tanks on the wintry day provoked responses involving 80% of *-no, -to* constructions. The interviewees said either *Ogłoszono stan wojenny* or *Wprowadzono stan wojenny*. This finding reveals that when situations are perceived as ones requiring human engagement, as it definitely was in this case, the most appropriate Polish construction is *-no, -to*. As far as word order is concerned, the observation that verb occurs sentence initially in the agentless constructions is strengthened here and will allow to make some inferences. Additionally, there were a few marginal answers employing active voice such as *Armia wkroczyła do miasta*. The English data gathered in the context of the third picture confirm the tendencies already pointed out in this article and they boil down to passive voice being the most commonly applied exponent of agentlessness ('*The martial law has been introduced*'). The position of the SVO word order is not susceptible to any modification no matter whether the situation involves agents ('*The war began*') or not.

Summing up, it should be stressed here that word order variation is not random or unpredictable. The research carried out for the purposes of this study shows that when subjects are stimulated to producing utterances containing entirely new information additionally deprived of an agent they behave in a foreseeable way in terms of a choice of a construction and word order. A lot, still, is to be done in this area bearing in mind that human languages being put to the same communicative functions process the data in a comparable manner and data obtained from speakers of other languages might contribute to universal character of this phenomenon.

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